A Matter of Risk

Roy Varner and Wayne Collier. New York: Random House, 1978. 258 pp. Illus. $10.00 ($9.00).*

The Jennifer Project

Clyde W. Burleson. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977. 179 pp. Illus. Maps. Ind. $8.95 ($8.06).*

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Commander Bublitz' 15 years in intelligence included duty in such places as Manila, Baghdad, and Batavia. During duty in Washington, he was an ONI collection desk officer and, later, head of the naval attaché system. An intelligence specialist and graduate of the Naval Intelligence PG School, he retired from active duty in 1963 and is now Vice President of the Chase Manhattan Bank.

In comparing the information publicly available on "Jennifer," there lies the challenge of answering the question: Just how much of the Soviet "Golf"-class submarine did the CIA succeed in raising?

Of the two books, A Matter of Risk is by far the more professionally done. The story flows well, jargon is at a minimum, and authenticating and often macabre details lend the book an aura of accuracy, which turns out to be largely undeserved. The authors display an appalling ignorance of naval and intelligence operations and procedures. And, following in the footsteps of such writers as Phillip Agee, Victor Marchetti, John Marks, Seymour Hersh, etc., who seem to believe that anything may be accepted at face value if it supports the theory that the CIA is an uncontrolled, uncontrollable, evil agency spending its time and money conspiring against the virtuous desires of the American people, Varner and Collier devote many pages to support the preconceived notions of the new left. They find deep, murky significance in the name of the research ship, Mizar, which located the Soviet sub. Mizar is a word of Arabic origin, meaning veiled or hidden; how perfect for a secret research ship, they say! If memory serves me well, the Mizar is a converted cargo ship, which like almost all AKs, AKAs, and AFs, was named after a star. To get from the Big Dipper (where Mizar is located) to evidence of convoluted minds assigning names, having hidden significance in other languages, to ships would be laughable were not so many Americans so well conditioned to believe such drivel.

Varner and Collier take the highest possible guesses of the cost of "Jennifer," assign to that the lowest available statement of the CIA's "take," and come to the predictable conclusion that the operation wasn't worth the cost. They tremble with melodramatic fear about the possibility that one of the sub's nuclear weapons might explode, despite the plethora of public information which indicates that submerging unprotected electrical wiring three miles deep in the ocean would negate the ability to detonate nuclear weapons.

Yet, despite many more errors of fact, terminology, and common sense, despite the political bias throughout, and even despite the absolute inanity of their conclusions, I enjoyed the book. I recommend it to anyone who is interested in salvage, intelligence, fantastic technology, or just plain adventure.

Clyde Burleson's The Jennifer Project is a junior G-man, amateurish kind of book with lots of wide-eyed innocence and a strong dose of Jack Armstrong-ism. The book is short on facts, long on puffery, and weak on analysis.

Burleson sinks his "Golf"-class submarine tail first, while Varner and Collier send theirs down bow first. He also laboriously constructs, with more good wishes than hard facts, the hypothesis that Project Jennifer was a huge success, recovering the whole submarine and learning a lot from her. He breaks his boat in three pieces, apparently because he believes that is what any well-mannered submarine sinking three miles ought to do, and Varner and Collier keep theirs intact because it seems to make a better story. Varner and Collier accept with alacrity the CIA statement that only one section of the sub was recovered, and nothing much in that

torpedo or two, a so-called code book (none of the authors seem to have any concept of the difference between codes and ciphers), and a lot of rotting fragments of the submarine. Burleson sends the lifting device, a claw-like gadget on the end of 16,000 feet of steel pipe, on three trips to the bottom; Varner and Collier send their device down only once, grab the whole sub and then drop two-thirds of her half way up. Sometimes it's hard to believe both books are on the same project.

The two books, however, do have some common ground. The obscure legality of salvaging another nation's warship* is given a lot of attention, with Burleson citing non-pertinent precedents (the Russian salvage of defeated Nazi Germany's U-boats in the Baltic), and Varner and Collier worrying that the Russians might be beastly about the whole thing. They agree, too, on Jennifer's salvage technology, although they disagree on how the Hughes Glomar Explorer maintained her ocean station. They do agree on the magnificence of the technological achievement. And they agree that Howard Hughes' motives in undertaking the project were obscure and complex, Varner and Collier finding them therefore sinister.

Well, back to the unanswered question: How much submarine did the CIA get? Some 15 or 20 years ago, when I was active in the intelligence business, a phenomenon became apparent to me. If you hypothesize a set of circumstances in an intelligence situation, and in the course of analyzing the hypothesis, you encounter a closed circle of reasoning, e.g., if you ask a man who appears to be involved a yes/no question, and you can be sure logically what his answer will always be, but you can't be sure whether he is telling the truth, you must assume that he is part of the situation. The following exchange will help clarify:
Question: "Are you involved?"
Answer: "No."

*See "The Recovered Sunken Warship: Raising a Legal Question," R. D. Wiegley, pp. 26-32, January 1979; J. Drahos, p. 22, March 1979; pp. 28-29, April 1979 Proceedings.